

## The Migrant as an Eye/I. Transculturality, self-representation, audiovisual practices

Article (Published Version)

Cati, Alice and Grassilli, Mariagiulia (2019) The Migrant as an Eye/I. Transculturality, self-representation, audiovisual practices. Cinergie, 8 (16). pp. 1-11. ISSN 2280-9481

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## The Migrant as an Eye/I. Transculturality, Self-Representation, Audiovisual Practices<sup>i</sup>

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Published: December 23, 2019

Experiences such as those of exile, immigration, and transnationality are central in the current political and cultural debate. Several filmic works and visual artistic projects focus their narratives on life stories, as shaped by distance (either geographic or memory-related) and motion (in terms of travel, border crossing and dis-orientation). Meanwhile, a focus on exilic and diasporic identities may lead potential audience to perceive migrant works merely on the basis of personal traumas of displacement.

This special issue of *Cinergie* aims at scoping the plurality of cross-media productions that define non-dominant forms of ethnic subjectivity, in the awareness of both the dynamic contamination of cultural models and the crisis of the ancient dichotomy between Self and Other. Challenging both the assimilationist logic and the processes of Othering, we witness now the reclaiming of identities that have already internalised their ethno-cultural roots. Despite the marginalization, repression and forgetfulness put forth by hegemonic political systems, the opportunity for minorities to freely express themselves seems finally emerging, as well as the possibility to let counter-memories arise.

However, if we consider — as Tobias Döring suggests — that the post-colonial self-definition develops and articulates itself as a process symbolised against the power of a colonizing or dominant gaze, we should observe and analyse more precisely the ways through which these works shape “the trope of seeing in the passage of the Eye/I” (Döring 1998: 156). On the one hand, post-colonial self-representation can subvert inherited determinations or cultural perspectives by claiming an independent way of looking (the stance of establishing a critical difference). On the other, ethnic subjectivities can only do it by admitting as far as view devices are affected by historical perceptions and consolidated structures of power (the stance of becoming aware of a cultural contiguity). Thus, the writing and depicting of the Self proceed both *counter* and *near* to the texts focused on representing the Other.

Indeed, the passage of the Eye/I is also a decisive concern in the main contributions devoted to the study of the relationship between self-representation and film. In 1980 Elisabeth W. Bruss published her seminal essay *Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film*, where she pointed out that “there is no real cinematic

<sup>i</sup> This essay is the result of the joint effort by the authors. In particular, Alice Cati wrote the introduction and section 1, while Mariagiulia Grassilli wrote section 2.

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equivalent for autobiography” (Bruss 1980: 296). Firstly, a structural inadequacy is highlighted because the connatural identity of author, narrator and main character, on which classical autobiography is based on, is being undermined by film, as any professional camera does not allow to be at the same time in front and behind the objective — that is, being the observer and the observed at once. Secondly, in the autobiographical process, subjectivity does not use the language as a medium to express its own capacity for self-observation and first-person consciousness, rather it takes shape as a performance or an action, through which — by narrating — the ‘I’ indicates him/herself as the subject of the act of speaking and designates the subject of the sentence that is spoken at once. In other words, Bruss considers that the autobiographical ‘I’ cannot survive as an ‘Eye’ during the moving from text to film, because she cannot really recognise the film as a language by and through which the Self can be properly performed, expressed and moulded. But despite it all, the author herself helps us to set a new direction in the study of the relationship between autobiography and film, by mentioning the need to read the film according to a phenomenological approach. In fact, as we can read in Merleau-Ponty’s well-known quotation, “they [the films] directly present to us that special way of being in the world, of dealing with things and other people, which we can see in the sign language of gestures and gaze and which clearly defines each person we know” (Merleau-Ponty: 58). Here it is attested a theoretical and epistemological attempt to go beyond the essentialist conceptualisations of the self, depending for long time in Western culture on the Cartesian idea of the subject, and create a context in which other modes and models of subjectivity can be recognised and studied. Moreover, it is clear that self-representation and self-narration are textual and performative processes that occur by means of any device, the cinematic or digital ones included. In this sense, the subjective dimension of the autobiographical filmic or video works is reflected many times by the use of the camera as an extension of the body and a source of experience. As Lilie Chouliaraki points out about the self-mediation process: “These textualities not only represent pre-existing selves, individual or collective, but constitute such selves in the very process of representing them” (Chouliaraki 2010: 229).

The study of self-representation of subjectivities that merge themselves with the reality in which they are ‘enworlded’ and enrooted implies to adopt a precise conception of the ‘I’ that, as Alisa Lebow claims, cannot be conceived as merely singular or transcendental but always as an empirical, relational and social entity. In her formulation of the ‘singular plural’ structure, borrowed by Nancy’s theories, the author shows the intrinsic formal dualism that inheres with self-referential and reflexive film works and, in particular, with the works she calls “first person film” (Lebow 2012). Indeed, this bond between the individual and the social context forces us to acknowledge the ethnic dimension of the self and of his/her first person products as, rephrasing Michel Fisher’s work on ethnic autobiographies, “meaningful site for exploring multiple subjectivities with implications for the larger culture” (Fisher 1986: 134).

By dealing with the idea that autobiography is a genre which Western scholarship has ascribed mostly to Europe and the West, we should however consider that the very theory of self-representation was conceived by the Western culture. The analytical patterns risk thus being soaked in pre-constituted concepts, not enough appropriated to non-dominant forms of subjectivity and ethnicity. Different conception of psyche and selfhood to what usually expected in the West can be deeply reframed within non-western cultures, ideologies and epistemologies (Brustad 2001). Clearly enough, contemporary globalization has inevitably affected the sense of self and subjectivities in different social, political and cultural contexts, as well as the devices adopted for the self-construction and self-understanding (Tianqi Yu 2019). Therefore, which role do ethnicity, cultural identity and personal history play in the construction of subjectivity in the contemporary audiovisual production? How models of self-inscriptions have been questioned in visual anthropology, film and media studies up to now?

## Life-writing: back and forth from the Self to the Other

From the Seventies/Eighties on, the influence of post-modernism, Feminist theories, and Post-colonial studies led to the emergence of life-writing<sup>1</sup> as a tool to discredit the bourgeois model of an individual, unitary, coherent and auto-determined subject (*I*), which resulted from a cultural amnesia or a censorship of the most

1. The term *life-writing* has been used to identify a wide range of textual forms dealing with life stories (autobiography, biography, *memoir*, journal, epistolary exchange, autofiction) (Saunders 2010: 321).

rough aspects of reality, such as desire, race, social power, emotion, body, etc. Despite the marginalization, repression and forgetfulness put forth by hegemonic political systems, the opportunity to claim the right to give voice to minorities seems finally to emerge, as well as the possibility to let counter-memories arise is ultimately unfolded.

As it has been widely observed (Rota 2009; Moore-Gilbert 2009), this also determines the implicit opposition between *auto-biography* and *life-writing*: the former derives from a modernist perspective centered on the male/white/Western subject, who is often seen as a pure abstract state of consciousness; the latter is defined as a room of expression for an embodied subject situated in historical, sexual, social terms, who is worn out by experiences of loss and vulnerability. Moreover, he/she is never reduced to his/her mere existential singularity, on the contrary, he/she is exposed to polyvocality, since he/she is rather solicited by his/her belonging to a community that simultaneously includes and transcends him/her.

As Gayatri C. Spivak also maintained, such orienting yet reductive framework is based on the radical question dealing with the real possibility to speak (Spivak 1988); this chance would imply that the ex-/post-colonial subject could represent himself/herself and tell his/her own story subverting the stereotype of Western culture, according to Spivak, autobiographical postcolonial writings may be interpreted as the output produced by a subject who stands for the community he/she belongs to by means of his/her voice, giving birth to a polyphonic text (Spivak 1998).

Michael J. Fisher pointed out that the progressive diffusion of autobiographical works thematizing ethnicity dating back to the late Seventies imposes a reinterpretation of the traditional aim of the anthropological method — that is, observing the others through ourselves, and vice versa (Fisher 1986). In other words, any ethnographic procedure develops a two-fold attitude, in that it adopts an empathic strategy directed to scrutinize the others in order to explain processes pertaining the Self. On the contrary, the rationale according to which we generally relate Self and Other, often tends to flatten the Other in relation to the Self, reducing the relationship to a comparative operation, merely focused on what is similar or different from us (Marabello 2012).

It is by looking at visual ethnography that we can find a real theoretical and methodological shift. In this case, the attention is drawn from a uni-modal form of communication (writing) to a new multi-modal representation of the self, which includes oral discourses, images, non-verbal language, sounds and so on. In his seminal essay on the construction of a subjective point of view in the ethnographic film, David MacDougall explores the history of anthropological cinema with the aim of observing how films do absorb the codes that seem to be essential to communicate the subjective experience of a *historical persona* (the real and living person as opposed to the fictional character) in the very passage from daily life to its representation. The result is a constitutive continuity between lived life and its symbolic elaboration.

Adopting a mixed approach that blends analytical and textual aspects, through which the different levels featuring the subjective point-of-view (narrative, enunciative, pragmatic) can be distinguished, the author identifies a typology apt to describe different intensities in the emergence of the subjective stance, including ethnobiography, observation, interviews and the personal film (*subjective camera*) (MacDougall 1998). The variety of textual types mirrors not only the flexibility of the filmic device as it intercepts the conceptual and methodological elements featuring life-writing (the multiplication of expressive forms combined with several auto/biographic discursive registers), but also the inherent complexity characterizing the representation of the Self from the point of view of the Other, which synthesizes the coexistence of first- and third-person perspectives.

To this regard, it is important to recall the fundamental experiment *Navajo Film Themselves* conducted by Sol Worth, John Adair and Richard Chalfen, who proposed a filmmaking course to a Native American community. In so doing, they presented a particular subcategory of the ethnographic film: the Bio-Documentary.

A Bio-Documentary is a film made by a person to show how he feels about himself and his world. It is a subjective way of showing what the objective world that a person sees is “really” like. In part, this kind of film bears the same relation to documentary film that a self-portrait has to a portrait or [biography to] autobiography. In addition, because of the specific way that this kind of film

is made, it often captures feelings and reveals values, attitudes, and concerns that lie beyond the conscious control of the maker (Worth, Adair, Chalfen 1998: 25).

Clearly enough, the concern for specific modalities of self-construction through the filmic practice as inevitably affected by the socio-cultural context is quite evident. The ethnographic film entails radical subjective stances in so far it couples the observer's traces to explicit modes of visual auto-documentation. However, a series of questions remains nonetheless unanswered: when and how does the Other actually have the possibility to represent him/herself? Why does the subjective camera process can be triggered only if the subject is aware of the cultural schemes he/she is deconstructing, and of the underlying textual strategies? Is it possible for the Other to activate a self-representation process without necessarily being a filmmaker? The ethnographic film is not to be intended as a real discourse revolving around the person at stake in his/her individuality, but rather it is the result of cooperation (Moraldi 2013), that is a dialectics involving the Self and the Other.

In a period of time focused on rethinking self-creation in light of the increasing extension of visual capacity by means of new technologies, auto-ethnography — intended as both research method and writing process — provides a relevant interpretational frame to encourage an in-depth study of the dynamics of assimilation between Self and Other (Watson 2001). According to Michael Renov and Jim Lane (Renov 2004; Lane 2002), the ethnographic concern emerges every time a filmmaker tries to understand him/herself as a subject situated within a specific historical process and social structure. Looking at *personal cinema*, Catherine Russell sees this kind of production as an experimental and postmodern form of ethnography; she underlines how first-person filmed cinema is able to convey the bodily and performative dimension of the Self, as this carries out the role of the talking subject, that of the seeing, as well as of the seen body (Russell 1999). A plural identity is therefore articulated; it is a split identity, constantly questing for itself, in order to get to understand its own idiosyncrasies, by means of its own cultural and ethnic formation.

Despite the attempt to be the stable origin from which his/her own memories stem, the filmmaker perceives his/her own temporal and spatial shifts as separate moments awaiting for reunion.

The autoethnographic subject blurs the distinction between ethnographer and Other by traveling, becoming a stranger in a strange land, even if that land is a fictional space existing only in representation. As a diary of journey, the travelogue produces an otherness in the interstices of the fragmented "I" of the filmic, textual self. (Russell 1999: 280)

Thus, the auto-ethnographic process produces a subjective space that merges the subject and the object of the gaze, as well as the anthropologist and the informant in the shadow of a singular identity. Furthermore, the contemporary visual culture surrounding the subject makes it possible to update the critical debate dealing with the traditional ethnographic autobiography at least as regards to two issues.

Firstly, it enables to introduce a broad conception of ethnicity, intended as cultural formation determined by sexual orientation, ethnic group, generation, social class, as well as by the adherence to a *world of appearances* or, as it is termed nowadays, a media-based imaginary that is culturally contaminated. Secondly, it allows to open up the issue of an increasingly availability of the so-called technologies of the Self, able to transmit multiple representations of the identity and diverse meta-discourses deriving from one's autobiographical impulses.

This latter update could be further extended thanks to the Internet, for the interpolations between visibility and *life writing* are multiplied by the World Wide Web that favors the circulation of various forms of self-representation, classified under the label of *digital storytelling*. The social vocation of these spurious texts made up of images, words and music highlights a clear autobiographical emphasis, as testified by the frequent use of first-person narration. Also, the consistent sharing of contents opens up the reflection on the democratic potentiality of bottom-up creative practices, whose main aim is to "give marginalized groups a voice" (Lambert 2006: 4). In general, such forms of self-representation assume the format of short films, in which the subject tells his/her life experiences showing some private images shot for the project or retrieved from the past or the personal media imagery. The multimodal dimension of such productions draws our attention beyond a simple comparison between written and oral devices. A more sophisticated reading delves into the personal identity as a pre-constituted subject/matter, socially shaped within and by the media, as well as by the ways through which people are seen and represented by the others. If a basic alphabetization for media languages

is necessary, at the same time digital storytelling puts the tools and formats of identity self-production at the core of its domain. In other words, it establishes an agentive self, able to articulate a media-based self-image, which is widely shown.

It is important to consider how *digital storytelling* took up the intricate ramifications of *life-writing*, and started to represent a useful tool to establish a plural view on past and present, enabling at the same time the preservation of memories otherwise excluded from the dominant political logics. Several institutions favored the creation of online digital archives, which collect video testimonies, autobiographies, and life stories that enable to acknowledge the expression of minorities.

Despite the intention to use these practices as a way to promote the cultural construction of a democratic citizenship, the chance to actually access forms of auto-representation from the side of the Other is still to be verified. The risk is to approach more easily those texts that are closer to one's cultural models and expressive modes, instead of the most authentic ones. At the same time, it is perhaps worth underscoring that the focus here is not the actual authenticity of the narration *per se*, which represents anyway a Western social construction, but rather the opportunity given to the subject to inform him/her self-representation drawing from his/her own cultural models and expressive traditions. In other words, is it actually possible for the subject to express and exercise his/her *agency* in the process of construction of an image of the Self? Once the platforms are used to share contents that put forth a narration of one's Self or about the community one belongs to, is there any chance to resist *etero-direction*?

As Clarke pointed out, the new challenge is now to avoid the development of a neo-colonialist appropriation along with the digitization of personal memories, because this would imply a selection according to Western codes indicating what museums, archives and libraries should preserve and exhibit — even when they act as *user-generated* institutions (Clarke 2009). Most likely, the marginalized subject may act himself/herself out and interpret his/her own history outside cultural notions such as authenticity and transparency (Hertzberg Kaare, Lundy 2008). His/her own presence within the community he/she belongs might also represent a sort of constraint to self-representation, in that this is the result of historical, social and political orientations, often characterized by a hegemonic point of view.

Within such a context, in the contemporary cinema and media industry — both in mainstream productions and in independent ones — we are witnessing the increasing sedimentation of symbolic forms, discourses and imagery regarding the current so-called 'migration crisis.' Many scholars have approached different projects with a series of interrogations: what do the refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants actually tell about their own experiences as they use the audiovisual device, and what modes of representation do they adopt? What identity do they convey? And, eventually, are they really able to represent themselves? (Cati, Piredda 2017; Risam 2018). In this sense, today more than ever, it is important to provide a new reading of some theoretical concepts in order to reconstruct and reopen the historical debate posed by visual anthropology and post-colonial literature, as it questions the Other's actual possibility to access media-based stances of self-representation.

## Countering/Challenging representations from within

In this age of highest expansion of new autobiographical forms thanks to audiovisual and digital practices (autobiographical fiction and documentary films and videos, digital storytelling, self-portraits and selfies, Vlog, Facebook and Instagram accounts, etc.), not only it is possible for anyone to produce and circulate self-representations as a banal and everyday practice, but it is also viable for current self-representations to join established discourses that reflect power relations at both social and geopolitical level (Thumim 2012; Poletti, Rak 2014; Chouliaraki 2017). How could then ex-/post-colonial subjects and their antecedents/descendants subverting the stereotypes of Western culture through their own direct stories? How can hierarchies be reinscribed when the Other's self-image is remediated in the Western media system? When and how does the Other actually have the possibility to represent her/himself?

According to Alisa Lebow, "[t]he film camera and other related recording devices have been used by individuals and families to document the massive cultural and geographical shifts experienced around the world for decades. [...] It is, relatively speaking, still a privilege to have the means to document one's own journey across



borders.” (Lebow 2012: 220). And yet as Abou Babacar Sidibè affirms the empowering experience of capturing on camera his own experience of migration — ‘I exist because I film’ (*Those Who Jump* 2016) — in such plural and innovative filmic creativity that we have elsewhere identified as the new genre of Fifth Cinema (Kaur, Grassilli 2018) — the filmic apparatus in some diasporic first person films not simply capture the experience of displacement, but can be in itself a symptom of that very displacement (231).

It appears urgent thus to revisit the value of certain terms, such as “Migrant/Post-Migrant” (Rings 2016; Leal et al. 2008) “Third [World]” (Gabriel 1982; Guneratne, Dissanayake 2003), “Accented” (Naficy 2001) — first applied to cinema productions, ethnographic films, experimental and visual-anthropological texts, and now including all other media productions (i.e. Bennett’s idea of ‘Accented media,’ Bennet 2018) — which are still defined by a hierarchy of values that place the Other in a condition of cultural subalternity (see also De Pascalis et al. 2017; De Franceschi, Polato 2019; Hemelryk Donald et al. 2019). The narratives and cinematography of these cinemas can challenge and redefine notions of identity, culture and national belonging — towards a new plural identity that is locally placed, globally connected and transnationally rooted. At the same time however, as Kobena Mercer notes in *Black Art and the Burden of Representation*, “when the artists are positioned at the margins of the institutional spaces of the cultural productions, they are loaded with the impossible task of speaking as ‘representatives’ [...] it is expected that they would speak for their own marginalised communities.” (Mercer 1994: 235). But even if through their visual creativity some filmmakers are challenging current media and visual representations of migration and calling for an understanding of the complexity of our contemporary plural global society, the label ‘migrant filmmaker’ may no longer be appropriate in most cases.

This special issue of *Cinergie* has placed greater emphasis on some of the contemporary various auto/biographic discursive regimes, which may allow for the emergence of a plural identity, which is dynamically questioning itself and its own and form idiosyncrasies by means of its own cultural and ethnic background. We are grateful to Julia Watson and Raffaele Pavoni, our first two essays in this special issue, that provide a very appropriate start to critically investigate these issues, both offering introductions to (and challenging) the notions of ‘autobiography’ and ‘migrant cinema’.

Julia Watson’s critical analysis of Manthia Diawara’s films — *Rough in Reverse* (1995) and *An Opera for the World* (2017) — offers a compelling vantage point from which to think about the focus of this issue of *Cinergie* on migration and autoethnographic cinema. As a diasporic subject, Diawara’s experience across cultures and locations affords him a nuanced position for reflecting on issues of *métissage* and hybridization central to theorizing postcoloniality. Watson outlines the sites and scope of Diawara’s intervention into ethnographic films and highlight the possibilities that his model affords for imagining an auto-ethnographic cinema adequate to representing the “Eye/I” of migratory subjects in situations of precarity. Diawara’s films, Watson claims, counter the norms and practices of ethnography in creating a new mode of cultural exchange that reworks — and seeks to reverse — the ‘Othering’ of ethnographic film. The question is here on whether cinematic counter-ethnography, as a hybrid genre of collectivized life narrative, can productively represent the movement of migrants from the global South by employing its counter-discursive potential to narrate their stories persuasively and non-stereotypically.

Raffaele Pavoni, in his contribution ‘against a migrant cinema’ unfolds instead the complexity and problematic of such a genre. As he argues, “the discomfort of the autochthonous, for which the ‘foreign’ filmmaker is admitted only to the extent that he tells us of his ‘foreignness’, calls into account the cinephile approach, intimately Eurocentric, to the ‘marginal’ cinemas.” By especially referring to the Italian context, Pavoni critically assesses the very notion of ‘migrant cinema’, often used in Italy to indicate a category of films on migratory topics. Whilst it tends to historicise a phenomenon — recognising in the current socio-political context a common ground on which such products, despite their diversity, may grow —, on the other hand, like any taxonomy, such concept flattens the individual artistic expression to a horizon of expectations. If such cinema does not speak of migrants, it is simply not interesting. The postcolonial perspective here proves to be effective, as it opens up film studies to important methodological contaminations. However, it tends to treat ‘migrant cinema’ as a genre of its own, thus transforming the “eye *of* the migrant” into an “eye *on* the migrant.”

The first part of this special issue present areas of investigations in which various artistic and experimental visual creativity intervene in the autobiographical narratives and self-representations around migration and marginality.

Through the contribution of Laura Busetta, we explore how aesthetics of (self)representing the marginal subject across cinema and the visual arts challenge the use of identification and control techniques within the contemporary visual context. As she highlights, by borrowing some symbolic aspects of such procedures and technologies of identification, such as the double image taken from the front and in profile, the identikit, the fingerprint, and so on, numerous artists have recently reworked some of the same tropes to redefine the representation of the migrant, the refugee, the illegal citizen, the subject at the margins, or the outcast. By referring to various examples — Jonas Mekas (*Self Portrait*, 1980), Daniel Spoerri (*Daniel Isaac Spoerri-Feinstein*, 1977), and Tanja Ostojić (*Looking for a Husband with an EU Passport*, 2000–05, *Illegal Border Crossing*, 2000) —, Busetta claims that through their work, they do not only critically read the related stereotypes and formulas but also explicit the violence that such technologies of identification inflict on the subject, whilst rethinking the notion of identity in a historical and cultural context that calls us to read self-representation in terms of notions such as body, gender, ethnicity, and displacement.

By focusing on the work of the Brazilian visual artist, performer, film and videomaker Paulo Nazareth (1977), Federica Stevanin analyses instead how the issues of migration in the contemporary world are artistically addressed by employing an autobiographical form of narration in which self-representation is a political means to explore the “mestizo” and the postcolonial, diasporic identity of the Latin Americans. The impossibility to belong, which characterizes the life of the contemporary global nomads, is investigated by Paulo Nazareth who becomes the spokesman of an invisible collectivity separated from their homeland due to historical, geopolitical and economic transformations: a diaspora of marginalized and invisible ones that Nazareth makes visible through his own body, photographs, films, and videos. Through his journeys and visual recording, he retraces the migratory routes followed by his enslaved ancestors to the United States (*Notícias de America* project, 2011–2012) and to Europe (*Cadernos de Africa* project, 2013) as means to rediscover his own ethno-cultural roots and, at the same time, to question the stereotypes commonly associated with Latin American and African American migrants. By following the uncertain path covered before him by many other migrants, Nazareth becomes thus the spokesman of all these ‘Others’ because he is one of these ‘Others’ too.

Finally Paola Valenti analyses how “Identity is an endless, ever-unfinished conversation” as creatively expressed through the art of John Akomfrah, here as an homage to Stuart Hall as well as the polyphonic memories of the Black Diaspora. The issue of the ‘unfinished’ construction of identity occupies a central space in this artwork and is inseparable from that of (self)representation, referred to as a constant negotiation of the positioning of a subject within a space of signification that changes depending on the historical and socio-cultural contexts in which it develops or to which it refers. Taking Stuart Hall’s statement quoted as a visual enactment, Valenti mainly focuses on a trilogy of works that has a direct connection with the legacy of this seminal figure — *Handsworth Songs* (Akomfrah, 1986), *The Nine Muses* (Akomfrah, 2011), *The Unfinished Conversation* (Akomfrah, 2012) — and witnesses to the creation of a postcolonial black subjectivity. Such artwork intermingles eye-witness accounts, memories, family pictures of individuals and families, newspaper images, archival and newly staged footage in a poetic montage of still and moving images — creating an affective interplay of multiple sonic textures, in a non-linear temporality in which past, present and future continuously overlap.

The second part of the special issue concerns self-mediation focusing on how autobiographical visual creativity expresses itself in terms of democratization and community belonging — as of the contributions written by Nicola Dusi and Damiano Razzoli, Samuel Antichi and Anna Marta Marini — or across gender — through the works of Samuel Neftali Fernández-Pichel and Valentina Ippolito..

Nicola Dusi and Damiano Razzoli write on how multimedia biographical discourses and digitally enriched documentaries reproduce the direct experience of migrants and their relationship with hosting societies. Their contribution focuses on how auto-biographic discourses and digital artistic based documentaries contribute to shape the figure of the migrant and of the border, and how these challenge the dialectic opposition between presence and distance in regard of the migration experience. They reveal that both the physical space crossed and lived by migrants (their trails, the Mediterranean, the city they reach) and the relational space performed and built in the encounter with ‘diverse’ people constitute not only a space of exchange, but also a sort of liquid and mutable border, with all the implications of meaning that are emerging in their dynamics and transformations. Starting from an archive of biographic audiovisuals produced by the Italian organization *Institution of Theatrical Practices for Self-Caring* (Teatro Stabile, Torino), social media tracks of storytelling



created by people sharing their experiences of encounter with refugees and migrants, as mapped and collected by the news organization *Valigia Blu* (the one which organizes the *International Journalism Festival*), and web documentaries representing the lives of people during their migration journey — such as *Refugee Republic*, *Migration Trail* and *Stories Behind a Line* — Dusi and Razzoli explore the concept of *semiosphere*. This is here conceived as a heterogeneous set of emotive, cognitive, cultural and social referrals related to a particular field connected through dynamic processes, which emphasize the importance of space, interconnectivity and of the multidimensionality of sign systems, as well as foregrounding the relational and interactional elements of culture.

Samuel Antichi presents instead the film *Les Sauteurs* (2016) — which (self)narrates Abou Bakar Sidibe's personal experience of an African migrant hoping to make it into Europe by scaling a barrier between Morocco and the outlying Spanish city of Melilla — as a key example to reflect upon the media witnessing and the migrant self-representation in the digital age. The film stands out in fact as a unique transnational product since the two filmmakers, Sibert from Germany and Wagner from Denmark, decided to hand off a camera to Abou, a Malian who lived on Mount Gurugu for the time being with over 1000 migrants, trying to cross over to the other side. Whilst conveying denunciation and social critique, as well as lending a voice to those who do not normally get one, by offering a platform for migrants to become actors and principal protagonists, *Les Sauteurs* sheds light on what has been invisible or discarded, thus providing a counterpoint narration from migrant subject position. Following the conceptualization suggested by Alisa Lebow in "The Camera as Peripatetic Migration Machine", Antichi argues that this film is a paradigmatic example in order to examine the relationship between migration and the moving image. The film reflects upon the very notion of self-representation — from representing to constituting one's own self — since Abou realizes throughout the filming of being both the subject matter and the subject making of the documentary. He becomes in fact aware of the importance of exposing the harsh realities which surround him, the evidence of his life and his experience in his own words, in his own language in order to make the viewer bear witness, opening up to new forms of visualization concerning the migrant experience. The migrant image becomes thus an audio-visual reconceptualization of historiography challenging hegemonic power relations and mainstream media.

As a final example of how autobiographical visual narrative can act as self-mediation in a political activist dimension, Anna Marta Marini in her contribution "*Ni de aquí ni de allá: the Dreamers' audiovisual self-narration and representation*" turns then our attention to the new prolific video production of the Dreamers — young undocumented immigrants in the US — who have started to use video means of expression, resistance and freedom, voicing their commitment to migrant justice, their struggle to fully integrate in US society whilst being illegal, and their fear connected to their status and the downsides intrinsic to the DACA opportunity. Channeling their voices through audiovisual narrations, they effectively contribute to document for the first time the reality shared by young undocumented immigrants in the US. In documentaries such as *Beyond borders: undocumented Mexican-Americans* (2016) — often of binational productions and promoted by organizations as the California-Mexico Center — they unveil the ambiguity of the American state and society on the migrant question as well as the related structural violence, revealing a slice of reality most of the American public does not know. Through their (self)representations they succeed thus to deconstruct preconceptions about what an illegal alien really is and how difficult it is, in fact, to obtain legal status, no matter for how long or how productively a Mexican has lived in the US, contributing to the local community and paying taxes.

The final set of contributions — *Self-mediation across Gender* — by Samuel Nefatli Fernández-Pichel and Valentina Ippolito, addresses issues of gender, within the framework of self-representation and autobiography visual narratives.

Samuel Nefatli Fernández-Pichel examines the construction of overlapping (trans)national and gendered (female) imaginaries in Kurdwin Ayub's *Paradies! Paradies!* (2016). Drawing, among other sources, on Lipovetsky & Serroy's theories about the *multiplexity-image*, his essay argues that Ayub's re-negotiation, and self-representation, of her own hybrid identity in (and through) the film results in the coalescence between, on the one hand, global media culture and traditional (Kurdish) folklore and, on the other hand, between pseudo-ethnographic filmmaking and the aesthetic deregulation associated to new media practices. Filmmaker and performance artist Kurdwin Ayub's works are in fact exemplary of the singularities of diasporic cinema in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In 1991, during Ayub's first year of life, her family was forced to leave their homeland (Iraq) and

find a new life in Vienna (Austria), where she was educated as an artist. Displaying precocious talents for both filmmaking and the performing arts, Ayub's early short animated and performance videos already address a consistent exploration of her own mixed identities. In these brief pieces, the tradition of home movies and the language of new media (i.e., the exhibitionist aesthetics of Youtube) are fused for the purpose of presenting Kurdwin Ayub as an *embodied* filmmaker, both subject and object of the/her cinematic gaze. *Paradies! Paradies!*, Ayub's first feature and the film here critically analysed, encapsulates many of the topoi and stylistic strategies previously shown in her short videos. In this documentary, the filmmaker, camera in hand, joins her father (Omar) in a journey to their native land, the Kurdistan, in Northern Iraq, where he is intending to buy a retirement house. During their short stay in these lands her father considers paradise, Kurdwin has the chance to visit their relatives, and to face her own identity at the border/s: both literal/geographical (the Kurdistan as a fragmented territory) and symbolic (Ayub's own expatriate condition). Similarly, Omar's reinvigorated masculinity — especially noticeable in the encounter with the Peshmerga (the Kurdish freedom fighters) — contrasts with Kurdwin's uneasy estrangement from a community within which her role as a young woman is mostly reduced to be "Omar's daughter".

The last contribution, by Valentina Ippolito, focuses on the work of Laura Halilovic, readdressing a lack of attention from scholarship on the works by Romani filmmakers who utilize self-representation and audiovisual biographies as their *modus operandis*. These cinematic techniques can take place by creating a number of interconnections between the past and the present, using letters, music, archive footage and photographs. Taking into account Hamid Naficy's framework on "accented cinema", Ippolito examines the modes of representation employed by Romani filmmaker Laura Halilovic in her film *Io Rom romantica* (2014), a fictional comedy about a Romani artist and her struggles to find her identity in a society that constantly rejects her. References to her previous documentary *Io, la mia famiglia Rom e Woody Allen* (2009) are also made in the article. Through her analysis, the author and the films conclude that ego distortion might be the only solution to survive for migrants living on the margins of society.

In conclusion, the essays collected within this special issue confirm the need to update the debate on the forms of self-representation and of the construction of subjectivity through visual and audiovisual tools, focusing on issues and questions related to ethnic and cultural identity. Whilst it is true that contemporary media allow us to share models of self-representation on a global level, research perspectives that seek to identify the roots of a phenomenon, which should not be exclusively read only through a Western-centric perspective, continue to be undervalued — especially in the context of Film and Media Studies. Through different methodological and analytical perspectives, the present work aims to move in this direction, aware of being able to identify precisely in the cultural contaminations, the diasporic movements and the inter-ethnic encounters those social phenomena that more than others have triggered revisitations of ideological frameworks and notions of new subjectivities.

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